**OBITUARY: Haing Ngor**

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The 1984 Oscar awards ceremony was dominated by Amadeus and A Passage to India, over-publicised if unquestionably entertaining slabs of popular culture made by once interesting directors. Far more powerful and haunting than either, The Killing Fields won only Best Editing, Best Cinematography and Best Supporting Actor - Haing Ngor - but it did win eight awards at Bafta, including Best Picture and another award to Ngor. The film was by no means perfect (the second half tried to appeal to Middle America with a "Better Dead than Red" tactic), but it can stand comparison with the great Japanese war movies, which its director, Roland Joffe, and writer, Bruce Robinson, had surely seen.

Joffe and Robinson believed that war - Third World war - was too serious to be left to the fiction-makers. Their starting-point was "The Life and Death of Dith Pran", an article by Sydney H. Schanberg which had been published in the New York Times Magazine and won a Pulitzer Prize.

The New York Times had sent Schanberg - played in the film by Sam Waterston - to Cambodia in 1972 to cover the conflict, later recognised as revolution, when the forces of the Communist Khmer Rouge rose against the Pol Pot government. As the Vietnamese breached frontiers, Nixon and Kissinger secretly sanctioned bombing Cambodia. However, Schanberg says of the policies of the Khmer Rouge that they shouldn't "underestimate the damage that 7 billion dollars' worth can do".

In the capital, Phnom Penh, Schanberg acquires an assistant, Dith Pran - a translator, guide, driver, messenger, secretary, played by Haing Ngor. As the Khmer Rouge approach (it is 1975), murdering millions at random, Dith Pran risks his life several times helping the journalists and other whites under siege at the French embassy. Schanberg is as proud of him as he is dependent upon him. The other Cambodians are ordered out, but Dith Pran, with a forged British passport, remains. We do not know his fate as the journalists are evacuated.

The second half of the film concerns Schanberg's quest for Dith Pran and the vicissitudes endured by the latter, till their eventual reunion. What had started out as the story of a foreign correspondent and a particular friendship uncovers other matters at its core: betrayal, corruption, mindless genocide and, above all, survival.

Ngor was a camera "natural", but the recognition for his performance was not so much for his acting as for his being; in the deepest anguish his emotions are understated. This was a celebration of a man and his heroism. Ngor, a Cambodian doctor who was himself a refugee, had not acted before, but his experiences after the Khmer Rouge takeover were quite as horrendous as those of the man he portrayed - as he recounted in his 1987 autobiography, A Cambodian Odyssey.

As a doctor, he was a target for the Khmer Rouge, determined to rid the country of Western influences. He fled the hospital where he worked while in the midst of performing surgery; he was arrested and tortured three times to make him confess his profession; he had half a finger chopped off and an axe hacked into his ankle. He saw his own father taken away to be killed for stealing food and he stood by while Khmer Rouge medics injected a child with a "remedy" which he knew would kill it. Like Dith Pran, he escaped to Thailand when the Vietnamese ousted the Khmer Rouge.

Settling in the United States, he worked in Los Angeles for a resettlement agency for refugees, as a counsellor, before being picked by chance for The Killing Fields. Other films followed, both for the big screen and television, the most notable of which was Oliver Stone's Vietnam story Heaven and Earth (1993).

On Sunday evening he was found shot dead - with a single bullet - beside his car at his home in Chinatown in Los Angeles. Yesterday, the police had still established no motive.

Haing S. Ngor, actor and physician: born Cambodia 1947; died Los Angeles 25 February 1996.

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